

I will rejoice

Reflections on Black Joy

Nekeisha Alayna Alexis
with W. Jean Mayes,
Stephanie Coleman,
Regina Shands Stoltzfus,
and Ashlee Pierson

I start and end most of my days with Black gospel music. Rising in the morning to Richard Smallwood’s “I’ll Trust You” or “One More Time”

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by Rev. James Moore and the Mississippi Mass Choir or Bri Babineaux’s “Make Me Over” calls forward my deep gratitude, stillness, and worship. Closing my eyes at night to Marvin Sapp’s “Perfect Peace” or Hezekiah Walker’s “Grateful” brings me deep reassurance into sleep.

These days, Ricky Dillard’s “You’re the Lifter” has become a new staple. In this song, the huge choir provides a sure foundation, repeating the words:

“When I’m down, You cheer me / When I’m weak, You strengthen me / When I’m broke, You fix me / I’m assured You’ll never leave me.” Meanwhile, each incredible lead vocalist, April Hall and Tamela Mann, weaves Scripture together with her story to proclaim with raw emotion and powerful praise God’s care, protection, healing, provision, renewal, accompaniment, and elevation. It is a sight to listen to and see.

I have cried unexpectedly with delight and awe watching videos of Black gospel performances. We who others deemed less than human; who were expected to go extinct or be perpetually enslaved; who remain targets of state-sanctioned violence; who some overlook intentionally and others violate though their indifference, ignorance, and complicity—for us to not only be here but to be here and *singing*? This in and of itself is testimony. It is witness. It makes joy. Black Joy.

Although this form of musical expression would undoubtedly wow others regardless of their backgrounds, the peculiar joy I feel is as defiant as it is uplifting. It is intimate with and embodies Black resilience and overcoming even as it radiates excitement and happiness. It is keenly

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aware of tragedy and fear, especially generated by White supremacy, combined as it often is with patriarchy, economic exploitation, heterosexism, and so on. But even as it is familiar with heartache and keeps an eye on its adversaries, even as it has known bitterness, Black Joy chooses, savors, and inhabits the very, very sweet.

Ultimately—and this is something I had to remind myself even in this reflection—Black Joy’s *center* is *not* pain nor Whiteness nor racism. Its center is *Blackness*: it is pride in Black forms of beauty, creativity, ingenuity, and thriving. Its center is personal and collective

awareness that it is *good* to be in the melanin we’re in, to speak with our tongues, to laugh with and at ourselves, to wear our hairs the ways we want. It is rejoicing in our cultures, which span the globe, and our histories, which comprise much more than shackles and chains. In a distinctly Christian sense, Black Joy finds its full strength in God, is sustained in Jesus, and is celebrated with the Holy Spirit. It comes from knowing that Jesus’s triumph over death and despair is also our victory: that we are free and free indeed *right now* and regardless.

When I first thought of a piece on Black Joy early in the year, the world was both radically different and essentially the same as it is now. The US president was just as unabashedly White supremacist in his rhetoric, policies, and leadership. The list of Black people killed in a new era of police murders was already too long. Emboldened racists and their tone-deaf cousins were already being blatantly and latently anti-Black. Then COVID-19 stormed in, and the nations quickly felt the fallout of skyrocketing infections and death; physical distancing and isolation; and, in the US edition, a health crisis turned into another political battleground. Then came the extrajudicial executions of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and another surge of Black grief and rage and un-

precedented uprisings. Describing Black Joy was tricky business in “normal” times. It is even more complicated, but perhaps more necessary, to write about it in such precarious and decidedly un-funny times.


Because Black Joy is as varied as it is vibrant, I felt a treatment of it needed more than a single story. So I put out a call to others to describe how they define, create, experience, and express it *and* decided not to over-edit or over-explain the responses I received. It is my joy, my Black Joy, that the following magnificent women accepted the invitation. I feel grateful for their insights and yield now to their voices.

Black Joy and prayer

W. Jean Mayes

The portion of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:11 reads, “Give us this day our daily bread”—or, to paraphrase, “Give us the food we need today.”

Looking around at the world today and the climate we live in, one can see this is truly a hard time in our history. There are instances when



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making the right decision can be difficult and life can become overwhelming. It is a time of great anxiety, never really knowing what the day will bring. Yet, I am maintaining a balance that will see me through.

During the moments that seem to overtake me, Jesus places this portion of Scripture in my mind’s heart. The verse takes on a powerful request. It is no longer bread for my body but nourishment for my spirit. My mind’s heart cries out to the Holy Spirit, “Give me the spiritual

strength I need to see past today and, Lord, guide me safely into your tomorrow.”

My parents taught me the Lord’s Prayer as a child along with this bedtime prayer: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Together, these prayers keep me grounded as this world swirls into chaos.

I didn't understand the importance of these prayers as a child, but as an adult I understand their depth. They are my portal to the throne of God's grace and mercy that keeps me anchored in the Lord. I know that I may not always be happy, but in the midst of it all, I still have perfect peace and joy in the Lord.

The anchor of Black Joy

Stephanie Coleman

Black Joy.

What is it? What does it mean? What does it look like? How does it feel? How is it expressed? These are just a few of the many questions that floated in my mind and my spirit as I sat with these two words.

Being a person of color. A follower of Jesus. Born and raised in the state of Louisiana. Having spent time with and lived for short periods

outside of the United States of America. Recognizing and being aware of the times I was required, willingly and unwillingly, to change my perspective, adjust my voice, and become someone different to make others comfortable. All of that and more caused a bit of discomfort and dis-ease. Why? I had made the decision to live by the words of our Apostle Paul to "live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). However, after sitting with the passage—after taking a moment to re-examine, to embody, to consider,

to reflect, and to more fully love on myself—I see clearly and understand that my Black Joy is in my inner peace.


Black Joy is encased, cocooned, surrounded, sustained, encircled, insulated, and protected by my inner peace, which is sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Black Joy is the pride in my Divinity and Holiness. When I remind myself that Black Joy is an inner peace, an internal knowing, I am anchored.

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Peace and Joy are twin siblings. When Joy is in the room, Peace is not too far behind.

This place called Black Joy is a destination. It is an anchoring space where peace can transcend and transform when understanding has gone



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on vacation. Black Joy must be continuously and courageously sought, especially during those times when a brother can't breathe (George Floyd) or jog (Ahmaud Arbery). Black Joy is the place I retreat to when the life of my vibrant sister is lost under questionable circumstances (Sandra Bland). Black Joy is the space I choose to consider when my little brother can't play in the park (Tamir Rice).

When I am attentive to the attack on my Black Joy, my inner peace strengthens my being. When I say to my soul, "The joy of the Lord is my strength" (Nehemiah 8:10), peace arrives to encamp around me, and stillness becomes my place of retreat. Stillness anchors and

reignites my Black Joy. Indeed, my Black Joy is my conscious choice and place of refuge when the world around me is falling apart because of who they think I am. My Black Joy must be alive and well in me at all times.

*I am that I am.
I am Black Joy!
There is only one power.
The power of joy.
The power of Black Joy!
I am Black Joy!
I am that I am!
I am that I am!
Black Joy.*

Black Joy and Black culture

Regina Shands Stoltzfus

One of the things that brings me joy, and for which I am eternally grateful, is the love for Blackness, Black culture, and Black people that was instilled in me by my elders, especially my mother.

My mother, Joyce Collie, moved from Miami, Florida, to Cleveland, Ohio, as a young woman. One of the first things she did in order to make

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friends and find community was to join Karamu House, the oldest African American theater in the United States. In addition to participating in community theatre, she joined a writers' group and helped co-found a small, non-profit publishing company called New Day Press. They took their name from the last stanza of "Lift Every Voice and Sing": "Facing the rising sun, of our new day begun, let us march on, till victory is won." This little company took on the

mission of publishing African American history books for children, filling a gap left by mainstream publishers.

When I was thirteen, Mom cast me in my first play—Langston Hughes's *Simply Heavenly*—and passed the community theatre bug onto me. It was a small part (the town drunk), but I reveled in learning along with the rest of the cast the beauty of Hughes's exploration of the joy and pain of Black life and love.

When I look back on the foundation my mother laid for me, I see how amazing it all was: a working class Black mama making sure her kids knew the glory of their culture. Yet none of these things seemed extraordinary to me when I was a kid. It was just our life. Blackness was, and is, creative, beautiful, and everywhere.


Maintaining Black Joy through laughter and affirmations

Ashlee Pierson

LAUGH

*Not that anything is funny about what is happening
But the fact that we are still here
To use the word of God to sustain our faith in times of fear
Our Black people are tired of dying
God help us please!
Use your voice and laughter in the face of the adversary
Continue, to rise up Black Kings and Queens
It only will get better when we are respected, valued,
heard and seen!*

These unprecedented times call for silence and action. Silence to listen to the heart of God to retrieve wisdom; then wisdom applied for action



It can be very difficult to have joy deep down on the inside—as our ancestors sung—when it appears the world is caving in and again justice is not served. Maintaining Black Joy is possible because it is intentional, and it takes a lot of work.

to continue to fight for equality and justice. That can be done through prayer, protest, voting, organizing action committees, or running for a political office, among other things. When this is accomplished, the seeds of Black Joy are planted.

The recent killings and protests can make us become angry, anxious, afraid, depressed, and uncertain. These valid feelings can take a toll on us and even those around us. It can be very difficult to have joy deep down on the inside—as our ancestors sung—when it appears the world is caving in and again justice is not served. Maintaining Black Joy is possible

because it is intentional, and it takes a lot of work. Some things in life were designed to throw us off course and defeat us, but recovering is a personal decision. One way to recover from being shaken and disturbed is acknowledging that things are different for you, whether in mind, health,

or strength. When you choose to recover the seeds of Black Joy, Black Joy will flourish.

Self-care is a strategy to improve our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Self-care is being mindful of your needs and doing something about it. For example, when feeling overwhelmed, one may go for a walk with a friend and vent. However, things are not so simple to do when a culture, a people, and a history are (still) under attack. It is not easy to cope with such disgusting and unfair treatment that seems to have no end, but I encourage you to laugh. Of course, laughter seems paradoxical, but laughter can be viewed as a new way of self-care for the Christian during the unrest. Laughter is medicine that can soothe the weary and troubled soul, according to Proverbs 17:22. Scientifically, laughter also reduces stress hormones and triggers endorphins to be released to make one happy and even relieve pain.

Laugh because you are not defeated!

Laugh because you survived!

Laugh because your life matters!

Laugh because you have a resounding voice!

Laugh because God laughs!

In addition to laughter, reading and meditating on the Word of God, dancing, singing, speaking positive affirmations, and therapy have been a beneficial and necessary self-care concoction to maintain peace and joy

Channeling anger into laughter takes skill and faith. Three times in Scripture God laughed at the wicked and their plans (Psalms 2:4; 37:13; 59:9). We can do the same too for relief.

and improve moods. I dance and sing because Isaiah 61:3 declares that the garment of praise was given for the spirit of heaviness. Since I could remember, praise has proven to shift things in the spirit realm as well as in the natural. Furthermore, reading and meditating on the Word informs me of God's will and promises. God is a God who will never leave, forsake, or fail God's beloved! I affirm what I meditate on—those sweet reminders even when it is hard to see the Scriptures being fulfilled. The Scrip-

tures were designed to read us (if we allow them) and give us grace and permission to be angry at what is happening around us and to not sin as believers of Christ because of it (Ephesians 4:26–32). Channeling anger

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Lastly, while declaring affirmations during challenging times, be very careful of your speech because there is life and death in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21). The world will only reproduce what you put out. Just as the world was framed with words, your world will also be framed with your words (Hebrews 11:3). To speak “life” (or to speak well) sincerely is the demonstration of unstoppable and unbreakable Black Joy. And if you cannot laugh now, I promise: there will be Joy after this! (Psalms 30:5)

About the authors

Nekeisha Alayna Alexis is a Trinidad native turned New Yorker who now calls Elkhart, Indiana, home. She is a graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary where she works in marketing and communications, and as Intercultural Competence and Undoing Racism coordinator. Her happy color is bright grass green and her deep desire is liberation for every body.

Rev. W. Jean Mayes is a lifelong resident of Elkhart, Indiana, where she ministers in a local congregation. Her happy color is violet, and a song that uplifts her spirit is “(Lord, Prepare Me to Be a) Sanctuary.” Nothing brings a smile to her face like a rainbow in the sky and the smile of a newborn baby.

Stephanie Coleman, MBA, lives in Elkhart, Indiana, where she is the director of programs for the Elkhart Education Foundation. Her backyard, which is bordered by huge trees that provide great shade on sunny days, a variety of annuals and perennials, and is visited by all sorts of wildlife, is her personal sanctuary.

Regina Shands Stoltzfus is originally from Cleveland, Ohio, and currently lives in Goshen, Indiana. She is professor of peace, justice, and conflict studies at Goshen College. Her favorite happy color is red.

Ms. Ashlee Pierson, LCSW, MDiv, DSW-c, lives in New York City. Cats never fail to bring a smile to her face, making her heart light and her mind temporarily forget everything around her.